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Three dimensions of an alienated life

Ephesians 4:17-24

One of the most popular tourist sites in Rome is the Colosseum. It is the largest amphitheater built during the Roman Empire, and can seat 50,000 people. The Colosseum also has a deep connection with Christian history. Each year on Good Friday, the Pope leads a torchlight "Way of the Cross" procession around the various levels of the amphitheater.

In Roman times, the Colosseum was used for public events and spectacles. Gladiator games, mock sea battles, animal hunts, and classical theater were all performed there. It was also a place for executions, and many early Christians were eaten by lions inside the Colosseum by order of the Roman Emperor Nero. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Pius V recommended that pilgrims gather sand from the Colosseum as a holy relic, because the sand was soaked with the blood of martyrs. This place finally came to be known as a Christian site in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In front of the Colosseum, there is site that used to be a prison. When my family visited the Colosseum a few years ago, very few tourists noticed the site of the prison. But we stopped for a while to reflect on the experiences of Saint Paul when he was imprisoned in Rome.

When Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he was allowed to stay in his own lodging, but with a soldier always chained to him. The book of Ephesians is a letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus. This letter was written while he was imprisoned in Rome. During his imprisonment, he received very little outside contact and few visitors. But in his writing we do not hear any complaints about his isolation. Rather, he was worrying about the Ephesian church that he had left behind. How could Saint Paul manage his loneliness, to think of others while in such isolation?

Scientists, philosophers, and any of us with common sense, understand that human beings are social beings. Without social interaction and relationships with others, life is miserable. Above everything else, human relationships are most important in life. But among these relationships, there are some that promote peace and happiness, while others lead to sin and tragedy.

Humans are relational beings. Shortly after God created Adam, he declared: "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." Adam and God had talked together in the garden, but God knew that Adam needed another human being with him. So God created Eve and instructed the couple to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Adam and Eve, having each other, as well as their relationship with God, were neither alone nor lonely.

When they fell into sin, Adam and Eve broke their communion with God and tension also grew between husband and wife. Selfishness and tension came into their relationship, along with feelings of loneliness.

In Jesus's time, he saw people who were isolated from others due to sickness, poverty, and powerlessness. In the language of Sociology, these people are called the alienated. Saint Paul focused on a different type of alienation. He believed that life

separated from the life of God was a life of darkness. There are several ways that a person can become alienated in their life, but the roots can be found in broken human relationships.

One source of alienation is a broken, unhealthy relationship between human beings and objects. Objects are given to us to use properly, and they bring us happiness and joy when they are used to their whole purpose. But in most cases, our relationship to objects is not quite right. We want to possess and own objects regardless of their use. Then we want to own more and more things. The greed to possess is often the beginning of tragedy. As each person wishes to accumulate more things, individuals need to fight and compete with others. When this greed is acted on by a group, such as a country, it leads to war with other countries.

Many people, perhaps most people, are not happy with their jobs. The sociologist Peter Burger believed that the process of production, or manufacturing, was one source of people's alienation from objects. In modern factories, workers are separated from the production of the final object.

Have you ever worked as piece-worker in a factory? Piece-workers do not participate in the whole process of production. They perform just one piece of the work of production. The welders only weld, and the steel-cutters only cut. These workers do their specific jobs from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. These jobs are often not very fulfilling, because there is little room for creativity at work, and little visibility into the big picture. The job is valuable because it brings the worker good money, but the paycheck doesn't always come with the satisfaction of completing the work.

Many people are also driven to earn and save money, for its own sake, without thought for how to use this money. Without a clear purpose for their lives, piling up their possessions becomes their primary lifestyle. This is also a kind of life alienated from objects. Those who lead this life are not always happy, because they can always see others who may have more possessions than they do.

God gave us objects for us to use them properly, not just to possess them. The owner of all things in the world is God, the creator. When we have an unhealthy, broken relationship with objects, our lives will be alienated from happiness when these objects are taken away.

The second source of alienation is a broken relationship with other human beings. God created human beings to love and to be loved, not to be used. When people take their tendency to use objects and apply it to human relationships, it causes much unhappiness. The tendency of people to want to have power over other people, or to use other people, is a major cause of human life alienated from others. Human beings remain in loneliness when they attempt to use each other.

Loneliness has been described as "one of the most universal sources of human suffering." It has been called an "almost permanent condition for millions of Americans... knowing no limits of class race or age." It hits everyone once in a while, and can last for a few moments or for a lifetime. Loneliness is the painful awareness that we lack meaningful contact with others. The lonely person experiences a feeling of inner emptiness, sadness, discouragement, and anxiety. They have an intense desire to be wanted and needed by someone. Lonely people often feel "left out," unwanted, or

rejected, even when they are surrounded by others. Lonely people can also feel a sense of worthlessness and a conviction that “since nobody wants to be with me, I guess I’m not worth anything.”

Some lonely people try to escape their isolation by joining groups of people in bars, other gatherings, or even church meetings. But they often remain isolated and unattached. They have trouble building significant relationships or gaining emotional satisfaction from the relationships which they do have.

I once visited a prison cell and saw the many levels of separation that are imposed on prisoners. Every small room is separated by steel bars and a locked door. There are no relationships, but absolute isolation, in prison. However, many people live in prisons created in their own minds.

The third and last source of alienation is a broken relationship with God. Being alienated from the life of God is the theme of today’s scripture lesson. This is “the inward darkness caused by unbelief,” which Paul contrasts with inner illumination. The original sin of human beings was pride toward God. This pride creates unbelief and disobedience of God.

Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil by Satan, who said: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” By seeking independence from God, human beings abandoned God. The tragedy was twofold: human beings abandoned God in order to keep their sins, and God reluctantly abandoned them when He could no longer help. The outcome of this abandonment to the sinful life is now alienation from God.

Religious life is not a matter of seeking fun in life, but rather finding and recovering the significance lost in life. Correcting our relationships with objects, from a tendency to possess to the spirit of proper use. Mending the relationships between ourselves, from a desire to use to a desire to love others. And recovering our relationship with God, from independence to dependence on God as the way to reach wholeness in life. Our old life is without Christ, and the new life is with Him, relying on His guidance and direction.